

Detachment and Compassion in Early Buddhism

by

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To people looking at Buddhism through the medium of English, the practice of compassion and detachment can appear incompatible, especially for those who consider themselves to be socially and politically engaged. In contemporary usage, compassion brings to mind outward-moving concern for others, while detachment suggests aloofness and withdrawal from the world. Yet Buddhism recommends both as admirable and necessary qualities to be cultivated. This raises questions such as the following:

If compassion means to relieve suffering in a positive way, and detachment to remain aloof from the world, how can the two be practiced together?

Does detachment in Buddhism imply lack of concern for humanity?

Is the concept of compassion in Buddhism too passive, connected only with the inward-looking eye of meditation, or can it create real change in society?

It is certainly possible to draw sentences from Buddhist writers which seem to support a rejection of outward concern for others. For example, Edward Conze has written, "The Yogin can only come into contact with the unconditioned when he brushes aside anything which is conditioned."¹ Similarly, G.S.P. Misra writes, "In the final analysis, all actions are to be put to cessation... The Buddha speaks of happiness involved in non-action which he further says is an integral part of the Right Way (sammá pa.tipadá).² Taken in isolation and out of context, these remarks can give the impression that the path to Nibbána implies developing a lack of concern towards everything in sa.msára. But is this inference sound? I would argue that it is not.

This is an issue which touches on the whole question of transferring concepts across linguistic barriers, in this case Páli and English. It calls not only for an understanding of how the concepts are used within the framework of the Páli Buddhist texts, but also for an awareness of how the English terms used in translation function and whether they are adequate. Inevitably, a dialogical approach between two linguistic frameworks is necessary.

Detachment

Viveka and virága are the two Páli words which have been translated as "detachment." The two, however, are not synonymous. The primary meaning of viveka is separation, aloofness, seclusion. Often physical withdrawal is implied. The later commentarial tradition, however, identifies three forms of viveka: káyáviveka (physical withdrawal), cittáviveka (mental withdrawal), and upadhi-viveka (withdrawal from the roots of suffering).

Káyáviveka, as a chosen way of life, was not uncommon during the time of the Buddha. To withdraw from the household life, renounce possessions, and adopt a solitary mendicancy was a recognized path. The formation of the Buddhist monastic Sangha was grounded in the belief that going out from home to homelessness (agárasmá anagáriya.m pabbajati) could aid concentrated spiritual effort. Yet to equate the renunciation which the Buddha encouraged with a physical withdrawal which either punished the body or completely rejected human contact would be a mistake.

The Buddha made it clear that the detachment of a noble disciple (ariyasávaka) — the detachment connected with the path — was not essentially a physical act of withdrawal, let alone austerity. Káyáviveka was valuable only if seen as a means to the inner purging and mental transformation connected with the destruction of craving. This is illustrated in the Udumbarika Siihanáda Sutta in which the Buddha claims that the asceticism of a recluse who clings to solitude could lead to pride, carelessness, attention-seeking, and hypocrisy, if not linked to the cultivation of moral virtues and the effort to gain insight through meditation.³

A further insight is given in the Nivápa Sutta, which weaves a lengthy story around the relationship of four herds of deer with a certain crop, representing sensual pleasure, sown by the hunter (Mára) for the deers' ensnaring. Both the ascetics who crave for pleasure, and those who deny themselves any enjoyment in an extreme way, are destroyed. Referring to the latter, the Buddha says:

Because their bodies were extremely emaciated, their strength and energy diminished, freedom of mind diminished; because freedom of mind diminished, they went back to the very crop sown by Mára — the material things of this world.⁴

The message of the sutta is that ascetic withdrawal can reduce the mind's ability to discern. It can also lead to the repression of mental tendencies rather than to their rooting out and destruction.

The detachment of which Buddhism speaks, therefore, is not an extreme turning away from that which normally nourishes the human body. Neither is it a closing of the eyes to all beauty, as is clear from the following:

Delightful, reverend AAnanda, is the Gosinga sal-wood. It is a clear moonlit night; the sal-trees are in full blossom. Methinks deválike scents are being wafted around...5

This is an expression of delight uttered by Sáriputta, an arahant, on meeting some fellow monks one night.

One must look away from external acts and towards the area of inner attitudes and motivation for a true understanding of the role of detachment in Buddhism. Physical withdrawal is only justified if it is linked to inner moral purification and meditation. In this light, cittáviveka and upadhi-viveka become necessary subdivisions to bring out the full implications of detachment within Buddhist spiritual practice. Upadhi-viveka, as withdrawal from the roots of suffering, links up with virága, the second word used within Buddhism to denote detachment.

Virága literally means the absence of rága: the absence of lust, desire, and craving for existence. Hence, it denotes indifference or non-attachment to the usual objects of rága, such as material goods or sense pleasures. Non-attachment is an important term here if the Páli is to be meaningful to speakers of English. It is far more appropriate than "detachment" because of the negative connotations "detachment" possesses in English. Rága is a close relation of upádána (grasping) which, within the causal chain binding human beings to repeated births, grows from ta.nhá (craving) and results in bhava — continued sa.msáric existence. The English word "non-attachment" suggests a way of looking at both of them.

The Buddhist texts refer to four strands of grasping (upádána): grasping of sense pleasures (kámupádána), of views (di.t.thuupádána), of rule and custom (siilabbatupádána), of doctrines of self (attavádupádána). All of these can also be described as forms of rága or desire. To destroy their power over the human psyche, attachment to them must be transformed into non-attachment. Non-attachment or non-grasping would therefore flow from the awareness that no possession, no relationship, no achievement is permanent or able to give lasting satisfaction; from the discovery that there is no self which needs to be protected, promoted, or defended; and from the realization that searching for selfish sensual gratification is pointless, since it leads only to craving and obsession. Phrases which overlap with attachment in this context and which can help to clarify its meaning are: possessiveness in relationships, defensiveness, jealousy, covetousness, acquisitiveness, and competitiveness. Through non-attachment, these are attenuated and overcome. There is nothing yet in this description which points to a lack of concern for humanity or the world. The emphasis is rather on inner transformation so that destructive and divisive traits can be destroyed, making way for their opposites to flourish.

To take attachment to sense pleasures as an example, many suttas mention the peril involved. The person attached to sense pleasures is likened to a "wet, sappy stick" placed in water. As such a stick cannot be used to light a fire, so the one addicted to sense pleasures cannot attain the "incomparable self-awakening" (anuttaráya sambodháya).⁶ He is one with whom Mára can do what he likes.⁷ He is like one holding a blazing torch, which must be dropped if burning and pain is to be avoided.⁸ In fact, it is stressed that attachment to sense pleasures destroys the mind's ability to think clearly and objectively. Virága, on the other hand, is linked to

the practice of mindfulness (satipa.t.thána) and to seeing into the truth of things. For Buddhists, therefore, non-attachment or detachment (virága) does not mean a withdrawal from striving for truth but a movement towards seeing the true nature of things more clearly. In contrast, sarága (attachment) leads to biased and false perceptions, since objects are sensed through a net of predispositions towards attraction and aversion.

Seeing the truth through non-attachment can operate both at a mundane and a higher level. At a mundane level, for instance, if greed always arises when an opportunity for gaining quick wealth is glimpsed, wealth will never be seen objectively as it really is — as transient, subject to change, and no answer to the search for happiness. Because of rága, neither the consequences nor the alternatives will be appreciated. In fact, if any decision has to be made, the alternatives will not be seen clearly as long as the mind is clouded by rága. Dishonesty and the manipulation of others in order to gain what is craved might result.

With reference to the higher stages of insight, satipa.t.thána, viveka, and virága are intertwined. Found in many suttas are words such as the following:

He (the monk) chooses some lonely spot to rest on his way — in the woods, at the foot of tree, on a hillside... and returning there after alms round, he seats himself, when his meal is done, cross-legged... (káyáviveka)⁹

Putting away the hankering after the world, he remains with a heart that hankers not, and purifies his mind of lusts.¹⁰

Aloof from the pleasures of the senses, aloof from unskilled states of mind, he enters and abides in the first jhána... (cittáviveka and virága).¹¹

The ultimate results of such practices are the four jhánas or absorptions; the verification, by direct vision, of the doctrine of karma; insight into the Four Noble Truths; and eventually, the knowledge that release from rebirth has been gained. Virága is, in fact, a prerequisite for attaining nibbána and the treatment of the word in the texts implies that the two are almost synonymous.

At this point, it is worth looking at how the word "detachment" has been used in the Western tradition. In colloquial usage, to say that a person is detached can be derogatory, implying that the person is not willing to become involved with others or that he or she is neither approachable nor sympathetic. This current usage must be borne in mind. Three strands of meaning, however, emerge from most dictionary definitions. Primarily, detachment refers to the action and process of separating. Flowing from this has come the military usage to describe the dispatch of a body of troops. More relevant to this study, however, is the third body of meanings connected with detachment as an attitude of mind. "Aloofness" and "indifference to worldly concerns" are phrases used to describe this attitude. Although these might appear to conform to the above-mentioned contemporary connotations, we find linked with this (in Webster's Dictionary, for example) "freedom from bias and prejudice." Thus, in both the Western tradition and the Eastern, "detachment" is linked with clarity of perception, nonpartiality, and fair judgment.

Voices supporting this come from the Christian mystical tradition and the contemporary scientific world. Classical Christian mysticism saw indifference to worldly and material concerns as an essential component of the movement towards God. Fulfilling God's will with total love and obedience was accompanied by detachment from the worldly. In modern scientific research a similar quality is emphasized. A commitment to truth is recognized but so is the necessity for a mind detached from the results of research, detached from the wish for a particular outcome. For it is known that if the scientist is searching for one particular scientific result, he might unconsciously manipulate the experiments or observations in order to obtain that result.

Therefore, when looking at the implications of "detachment," it is worth taking into account Western usage as well. The socially active person can be quick to look down on those who appear either distanced from or untouched by the social, economic, and political crises facing the world. But they should remember that detachment can have a positive fruit even in relation to social activism: the ability to see the truth more clearly and to judge more impartially.

To return to the Buddhist tradition: The Buddha was once faced with the remark that the most worthy person is the one who speaks neither in dispraise of the unworthy nor in praise of the praiseworthy. The Buddha disagreed with this. He replied that, because of his ability to discriminate, the person who speaks in dispraise of the unworthy and in praise of worthy is best.¹² The Buddha rejects the self-distancing which refuses to take sides or to speak out against what should be condemned. He criticizes the desire to keep the truth inviolate and unspoken through a wish not to become involved with society. Viveka and virāga therefore do not imply the kind of withdrawal which is unconcerned with what is good or bad for human welfare.

The fruits of non-attachment are not only linked with the gaining of knowledge, the "incomparable self-awakening," but are also related to creating a just and harmonious society. The Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta makes a direct connection between attachment to sense pleasures and the movement towards chaos in society. Greed for the possessions of another leads to disputes and contentions at the level of both the family and nation, until "having taken sword and shield, having girded bow and quiver, both sides mass for battle and arrows are hurled and swords are flashing."¹³ In the same sutta, theft, adultery, and vicious corporal punishment are likewise attributed to sense pleasures and attachment to them.

In other texts, attachment to views is spoken about as a cause of disputes, especially in the religious community. Yet the point drawn is relevant to the whole of society. The result of a person asserting, "This is the very truth, all else is falsehood," is dispute. And: "If there is dispute, there is contention; if there is contention, there is trouble; if there is trouble, there is vexation."¹⁴

Therefore, far from implying lack of concern for the welfare of others, detachment from such things as sensual desires and the urge to assert dogmatic views is seen as essential to it. We are back to the four strands of grasping and the need to root these out.

Compassion

Karu.ná is the Páli word translated as compassion. Contemporary writers have spoken of it thus:

It is defined as that which makes the heart of the good quiver when others are subject to suffering, or that which dissipates the suffering of others.¹⁵

Compassion is a virtue which uproots the wish to harm others. It makes people so sensitive to the sufferings of others and causes them to make these sufferings so much their own that they do not want to further increase them.¹⁶

This (compassion) isn't self-pity or pity for others. It's really feeling one's own pain and recognizing the pain of others... Seeing the web of suffering we're all entangled in, we become kind and compassionate to one another.¹⁷

The above definitions vary. Yet central to all is the claim that karu.ná concerns our attitude to the suffering of others. In the Buddhist texts the term often refers to an attitude of mind to be radiated in meditation. This is usually considered its primary usage. Nevertheless, the definitions of Buddhist writers past and present, as well as the texts themselves, stress that it is also more than this. Anukampá and dayá, often translated as "sympathy," are closely allied to it.¹⁸ In fact, at least three strands of meaning in the term "compassion" can be detected in the texts: a prerequisite for a just and harmonious society; an essential attitude for progress along the path towards wisdom (paññá); and the liberative action within society of those who have become enlightened or who are sincerely following the path towards it. All these strands need to be looked at if the term is to be understood and if those who accuse Buddhist compassion of being too passive are to be answered correctly.

The foundation for any spiritual progress within Buddhism is the Five Precepts. Rites, rituals, ascetic practices, and devotional offerings are all subservient to the morality they stress. Compassion for the life, feelings, and security of others is inseparably linked with the first, second, and fourth precepts.

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from injury to living things (pá.nátipátá verama.nii sikkhápada.m samádiyámi).

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from taking what is not given (adinnádáná verama.nii sikkhápada.m samádiyámi).

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from false speech (musávádá verama.nii sikkhápada.m samádiyámi).

For instance, the ideal of ahi.msá (non-harming) of the first must flow from compassion if it is to be effective. The Vasala Sutta makes this relationship explicit, although the word dayá, usually translated as sympathy or compassion, is used and not karu.ná:

Whoever in this world harms living beings, once-born or twice-born, in whom there is no compassion for living beings — know him as an outcast.¹⁹

(Ekaja.m vá dija.m vá pi yo pá.náni hi.msati, yassa pá.ne dayá n'atthi ta.m jaññá 'vasalo' iti.)

Important to the exercising of this kind of compassion is the realization that life is dear to all, as shown in the following Dhammapada verse:²⁰

All tremble at violence
Life is dear to all
Putting oneself in the place of another
One should neither kill nor cause another
to kill.

(Sabbe tasanti da.n.dassa
Sabbesa.m jiivita.m piya.m
Attána.m upama.m katvá
Na haneyya na ghátaye.)

Here, non-harming and compassion flow both from a sensitivity to our own hopes and fears and the ability to place ourselves in the shoes of others. Compassion towards self and compassion towards others are inseparable.

The Buddha's teachings about statecraft and government also embody compassion as a guiding principle. The Cakkavatti Siihanáda Sutta describes a state in which the king ignores his religious advisers and does not give wealth to the poor. Poverty becomes widespread and, in its wake, follow theft, murder, immorality in various forms, and communal breakdown. The culmination is a "sword period" in which men and women look upon one another as animals and cut one another with swords. In this sutta, lack of compassion for the poor leads to the disintegration of society. Lack of social and economic justice leads to disaster. In contrast, the ideal Buddhist model for society, as deduced from the texts, would be one in which exploitation in any part of its structure is not tolerated. Such a society would be rooted in compassion. Compassion is its prerequisite.

To move to the second strand, I have already stated that the word "karu.ná" was most often mentioned in the texts in the specialized context of meditation to denote an important form of mind training. Here the emphasis is on each person's pilgrimage towards Nibbána rather than on interaction with other beings.

For example, the Kandaraka Sutta describes the path of a person who "does not torment himself or others." Moral uprightness is stressed initially but the final stages of the path are seen purely in terms of meditation and mind-training. At this point, no mention is made of outgoing action:

By getting rid of the taint of ill-will, he lives benevolent in mind; and compassionate for the welfare of all creatures and beings, he purifies the mind of the taint of ill-will.²¹

In this context, the development of karu.ná plays an essential part in the meditation practice that leads towards wisdom (paññá) and the destruction of craving. The importance of this must not be underestimated. The development of a compassionate mind is a direct preparation for right concentration (sammá samádhi) and a prerequisite of Nibbána:

If from a brahman's family... if from a merchant's family... if from a worker's family... and if from whatever family he has gone forth from home into homelessness and has come into this dhamma and discipline taught by the Tathágata, having thus developed friendliness (mettá), compassion (karu.ná), sympathetic joy (muditá), and equanimity (upekkhá), he attains inward calm — I say it is by inward calm that he is following the practices suitable for recluses.²²

Karu.ná is one of the four "brahmáviháras" or sublime states, along with mettá, muditá, and upekkhá. The higher stages are seen to rest on them because they have the power to weaken the defilements of lust, ill-will, and delusion and to bring the mind to a state of peace. Rarely is meditation mentioned without reference to them.

Yet a distinction must be made between mettá and karu.ná. The two are linked together at one level through the brahmáviháras. Yet, in the texts, mettá constantly remains a disposition, an interior attitude. Karu.ná is more than this. Significant here is Buddhaghosa's treatment of the word in the Visuddhimagga. When referring to the brahmáviháras, he treats karu.ná in a similar way to mettá. Yet, in a later definition, his words can be translated as:

When there is suffering in others it causes good people's hearts to be moved, thus it is compassion. Or, alternatively, it combats (ki.náti) others' suffering and demolishes it, thus it is compassion. Or, alternatively, it is scattered upon those who suffer, or extended to them by pervasion, thus it is compassion.²³

Bhikkhu Ñá.namoli, in the notes to his translation, stresses that ki.náti here does not come under the usual meaning of "to buy" but is linked with the Sanskrit kr.náti, to injure or kill. Therefore he chooses to translate it as "combat," unmistakably connecting Buddhaghosa's definition of karu.ná with action.

In a later paragraph, Buddhaghosa adds that compassion succeeds "when it makes cruelty subside and it fails when it produces sorrow."²⁴ To Buddhaghosa, karu.ná was both a deliverance of the mind and liberative action or, more exactly, a quality compelling people towards such action.

This emphasis on liberative action is seen supremely in AAcariya Dhammapála's words about the great compassion (mahákaru.ná) and wisdom (paññá) of the Buddha.²⁵ The passage is structured in a series of parallel sentences, each one contrasting and comparing the fruits of the two qualities. The following are selected from the longer whole:

It is through understanding (= wisdom) that he fully understood others' suffering and through compassion that he undertook to counteract it... It was through understanding that he himself crossed over and through compassion that he brought others across...

Likewise it was through compassion that he became the world's helper and through understanding that he became his own helper.

In the above passage, paññá or wisdom is connected with knowledge and insight, and karu.ná or compassion with liberative action. The two are held in corrective balance, counteracting the view that karu.ná is linked only with the passivity of

meditation. For the Enlightened One, karu.ná was what impelled him to remain in society as teacher and liberator. He saw the need of the murderer, Angulimála, and a destructive life was put on another course.²⁶ For forty-five years, he preached in the face of criticism, opposition, and misunderstanding, in the knowledge that the Dhamma would be understood only by a few. He did not hide the fact that suffering is universal, but made compassion the reverse side of this truth, as is shown in the traditional stories of his encounters with Pa.tácára,²⁷ Kiságotamii,²⁸ and the slave girl Rajjumála.²⁹ He was not slow either to admonish monks who were unwilling to tend the sick among them or to do the tending himself, however distressing the illness was: "Whoever would attend on me should attend on the sick" (yo ma.m upa.t.thaheyya so gilána.m upa.t.thaheyya) has come down the centuries as words he said on one such occasion.³⁰

This ideal was placed before the whole monastic Sangha. Although many members of the Sangha may have failed to reach it, it is certain that some attained a stage where compassionate, loving action had replaced selfishness. In the final stage of the path, there is a sense in which action ceases. Yet it is the kind of action which is dictated by attraction or aversion which must stop, action which has kammic results, not that which flows from a purified mind filled with compassion. The mission he set for himself and for the Sangha was one of compassionate, liberative action. The first sixty arahants were sent out with the words:

Go forth, bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of gods and men. Let not two go by the same way.³¹

Mahákassapa is praised because "he teaches the doctrine to others out of pity, out of caring for them, because of his compassion for them."³²

For the above disciples, all that had to be done for their release had been done. They now embodied compassion. Compassion was their nature — Mahaákaru.ná, great compassion, rather than the elementary compassion which the novice on the path attempts to radiate and practice. For these disciples, all desire for self-promotion and self-achievement had been replaced with outward-moving energy. Therefore, any statement which describes the enlightened Buddhist disciple as distant from society would be false, or, more exactly, would be using inappropriate categories. The strength of the concept of compassion within Buddhism is that it is both a powerful form of mental purification and a form of liberative action.

Final Reflections

This paper began with questions raised by observers about the Buddhist notions of detachment and compassion. They center around two main points: that the two concepts seem to represent contradictory forces, the one moving away from society and the other towards it; that the Buddhist concept of compassion is not active enough, being more connected with personal spiritual growth than the altruistic reformation of society.

Part of the problem is the linguistic framework and the modern connotations surrounding such concepts as "detachment." The question would not arise in the same form for those thinking exclusively in Páli and using the terms virága and

karu.ná. It would be evident to them that virága does not imply apathy and indifference but a freedom from passion and attachment that is necessary if actions are not to become biased or partial. For what passes as compassion can cloak emotions of a very different kind, such as anger, attachment, or the wish to interfere.

With reference to the second point, a distinction in terms must be made. There is a form of concern for self which is compatible with and even essential to altruism. The care for oneself which enables one to feel empathy with others can be termed "autism." Autism is necessary for altruism, since it is necessary to be able to accept and even love oneself before one can show true empathy and compassion for others, before one can feel what they feel. Autism is not egoism. Egoism is the enemy of both autism and altruism. Egoism seeks to use others for the material welfare and gain of self. Its "love" is possessive and manipulative. Egoism has to be destroyed if karu.ná is to develop.

Virága, viveka, karu.ná and anukampá are inter-related terms within Buddhism. Compassion needs the clear insight that viragá can bring. The challenge for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike is to realize this in our lives. All societies need the active, liberative compassion which seeks to relieve the suffering of others, establish greater justice, and assert the dignity and equality of human beings. Karu.ná should certainly be seen in its concentrated meditative form as a powerful and peace-giving discipline of the mind and an important part of any spiritual path. But it should never be confined to this framework. It breaks the framework as liberative action to relieve suffering and oppression.

Notes

1. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, 1960, Ch.5.
2. G.S.P. Misra, *Development of Buddhist Ethics*, p. 44.
3. D Sutta No. 25.
4. M I 156.
5. Ibid.
6. M I 240-42.
7. M I 173.
8. M I 130.
9. D I 67, etc.
10. D I 68, etc.
11. D I 73.

12. A II 100-1.
13. M I 86.
14. M I 499.
15. Nárada Maháthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings* (BPS, 1988), p.372.
16. Edward Conze, *op. cit.*, Ch.6.
17. Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight* (BPS, 1980), pp.125-26.
18. Harvey Aronson in *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1980) looks at the relationship between karu.ná and anukampá and quotes Buddhaghosa (SA II 169) to indicate that anukampá and karu.ná are similar (p.11).
19. Sn 117.
20. Dh. v, 130. Trans. by Acharya Buddharakkhita.
21. M I 347.
22. M I 284.
23. *The Path of Purification*, Bhikkhu Ñá.namoli trans. (BPS, 1975), IX 92.
24. *Ibid.*, IX 94.
25. From Paramatthamañjuusá, his commentary to the *Visuddhimagga*; quoted at *Path of Purification*, Ch. VII, n.9. This passage has been studied by Aloysius Peiris in "Some Salient Aspects of Consciousness and Reality in Pali Scholasticism as reflected in the Works of AAcariya Dhammapála," 1971.
26. M II 97.
27. See E.W. Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends* (PTS, 1969).
28. *Ibid.*, 2:257-60.
29. *Vimánavatthu*, No. 50.
30. Vin I 302.
31. Vin I 20.
32. S II 199-200.

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